

Oral Statement of Benigno R. Fitial
Governor of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

Before the Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife
House Natural Resources Committee
U.S. House of Representatives

Hearing on H.R. 934, To Convey Certain Submerged Lands to the
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands

February 25, 2009

Chairwoman Bordallo, Ranking Member Henry Brown, and Distinguished
Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Benigno R. Fitial. I am the elected Governor of the
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Thank you for the opportunity
to appear here today in support of H.R. 934. I appreciate the consideration which
the Subcommittee has shown in scheduling two legislative hearings today on
matters of interest to the Commonwealth while I am in Washington attending the
annual meeting of the National Governors Association.

As you know, the question of Commonwealth control over submerged
lands has been a controversial issue in our community for several decades.
Litigation regarding the matter finally reached the U.S. Supreme Court a few
years ago and the legal issues are now resolved.

I appear here today in large part because of discussions with the former
chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, James Connaughton, late last
year. We were engaged in negotiations regarding the scope and terms of the
Marianas Trench Marine National Monument, announced by President Bush on
January 6, 2009.

I am very pleased with the final version of this National Monument. It recognizes and accommodates the local concerns that I and other elected Commonwealth officials identified. I have appointed three very qualified representatives of the CNMI to be members of the Advisory Council. I look forward to the appointment of the two federal representatives in the near future so that the Council may begin its consideration of how best to manage the Monument.

During our discussions, Chairman Connaughton promised that his Administration would support legislation giving the Commonwealth control over its submerged lands. The Proclamation expressly recognized that subsequent legislation might grant the Commonwealth control over submerged lands and that these lands “may remain part of the monument, for coordination of management with the Government of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.” I hope that the new Administration will also support this legislation.

Chairman Connaughton also indicated that the Council on Environmental Quality, together with other interested agencies, would develop legislation providing for some form of revenue sharing with respect to mineral deposits on federal submerged lands. Such legislation might be of significant economic benefit to the insular areas. I request that this Subcommittee at some appropriate time direct its attention to the development and enactment of such legislation.

Thank you.

Testimony of
Benigno R. Fitial
Governor of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands
and
Member, U.S. Coral Reef Task Force

Before the
Subcommittee on Insular Affairs, Oceans and Wildlife
House Natural Resources Committee
U.S. House of Representatives

Hearing on H.R. 860, *Coral Reef Conservation Act Reauthorization and Enhancement Amendments of 2009*

To Reauthorize the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000

February 25, 2009

Greetings!

Chairwoman Bordallo, Ranking Member Henry Brown, and Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee: My name is Benigno R. Fitial, and I am the elected Governor of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) I thank you for this opportunity to testify on behalf of the people of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the U.S. All Islands Coral Reef Committee (AIC), and the members of the United States Coral Reef Task Force, in support of the reauthorization of the Coral Reef Conservation Act of 2000.

The Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands are made up of 14 islands extending over 600 kilometers and located in the western Pacific basin. The people of CNMI value coral reefs and are dedicated to their conservation. Coral reefs are important to CNMI because they provide traditional and subsistence uses, production of commercial food products, recreational opportunities for a healthy tourist economy, physical protection of the coastal zone from storms, diversity, rarity, and uniqueness of life forms, and, educational and research uses. Coral reefs also are an important part of CNMI's cultural heritage.

Increased population and development over the past decade in the CNMI has exacerbated the threats to the coral reef ecosystems and has led to the destruction and reduced health of coral reefs and coral reef-associated habitats. From a long-term perspective, the decline in coral reef coverage and marine health threatens CNMI's cultural heritage, traditional ways of life, and physical protection from storms. This decline, however, also immediately impacts CNMI's tourism and fisheries industries, and thus its economy. The

CNMI government considers coral reef ecosystem conservation and management a high-priority concern.

I am here to testify today that the primary consideration of the island jurisdictions is the protection of our coral reefs and the safeguarding of all people who historically depend on these precious, natural marine resources, economically, ecologically and culturally.

Marine National Monuments

The CNMI is very pleased that late last year, President Bush designated three heretofore remote and unknown Pacific Ocean regions as national marine monuments. Through this designation federal protection has been added to nearly 200,000 (195,280) square miles of high seas. These bold designations represent the largest fully protected marine area in the world.

The Marianas Trench Marine National Monument consists of three components. The first component is the waters and submerged lands encompassing the coral reef ecosystem of the three northernmost islands of the Marianas archipelago. Remarkably, these islands are home to more than 300 species of stony corals. The second component is the actual Marianas Trench itself, the site of the deepest place on Earth, approximately 940 nautical miles long and 38 nautical miles wide within the Exclusive Economic Zone of the United States. The third component is a series of smoldering active undersea volcanoes and thermal vents. Twenty-one active hydrothermal submarine volcanoes and vents have been identified and each supports life in the harshest heat and sulfuric conditions imaginable.

Current work

All the coral island jurisdictions, in partnership with NOAA, the Department of Interior, and other federal agencies, over the last four years have developed and implemented Local Action Strategies (LAS) to address threats to the Nation's vulnerable coral reef ecosystems. To date, the CNMI we has implemented over 100 projects to reduce damaging human-caused impacts. We have been able to address an adequate amount of land-based pollution in two major watersheds through revegetation efforts that pulled the community and government to work collaboratively. Plans have been developed for a road and drainage improvement at a dive site frequented by tourists because of its vibrant coral reef and unique ecosystem. In this process they have engaged a range of federal, local, non-governmental and academic organizations and stakeholders, and the states and territories have successfully leveraged volunteer services and in-kind resources by a rate approaching three dollars for every federal dollar.

There is much more to be done. Our biggest challenge is the need for additional funding and resources to complete the projects identified in the LAS's. Approximately \$37 million dollars, over 50 percent of the total cost for implementing these projects is still needed. We all recognize the need to not only maintain these existing efforts but also to greatly expand them in the future. Another challenge is the limited capacity of local

agencies to manage the wide range of activities that impact coral reefs, particularly in the territorial and commonwealth jurisdictions. While the LAS's underway are extensive, they do not encompass the full range of activities needed to address all threats to coral reefs. Since our goal is to not only reverse the decline of coral reefs but to rebuild these ecosystems, we must expand and extend efforts to more fully encompass the management challenges in each jurisdiction.

International Coral Reef Conservation Program

We have concerns with this section which authorizes NOAA to establish an International Coral Reef Conservation Program to carry out activities with respect to coral reef ecosystems in waters outside U.S. jurisdiction. While an international program may be a worthwhile concept, the seven U.S. coral jurisdictions and three Freely Associated States still have pressing coral reef conservation and management needs and priorities that have yet to be funded.

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The Micronesia Challenge which include the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Palau and U.S. Territory of Guam and the Northern Marianas have embarked on this initiative, that aims at effective conservation of at least 30% of nearshore marine and 20% of terrestrial resources by 2020. The MC will support the long-term protection of areas of highest biodiversity significance within the Micronesian region - spanning over 6.7 million km² of island and ocean. Thus, this initiative can be an avenue for communities in building resilience to climate change, ensuring a sustained environment while addressing our communities' livelihoods.

Given the importance of coral reefs, the growing threats, and the work yet to be done to protect these magnificent ecosystems, it is imperative that Congress reauthorize and strengthen the Coral Reef Conservation Act.

We encourage a more active and broader engagement by ALL federal agencies in the implementation of each jurisdiction's coral reef management priorities, and assistance in the development of each jurisdiction's coral reef conservation implementation plans

We especially appreciate and commend the quick, timely action taken by Chairwoman Bordallo and the Subcommittee to introduce and sponsor H.R. 860, "*Coral Reef Conservation Act Reauthorization and Enhancement Amendments of 2009*." We thank the Representatives for including appropriations for the Office of Insular Affairs in the Department of the Interior and for including a regulatory framework to further strengthen the protection of coral reefs.

In conclusion, I hope this testimony will be useful to assist the Sub-Committee with the re-authorization of the Coral Reef Conservation Act. I appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony on this important bill and the persons I represent look forward to continue to work with you on H.R.860. We are grateful for your support in helping us halt the decline of these magnificent marine resources and for your effort to achieve sustainable coral reef management. Our people, communities, cultures and economies are depending on you. Thank you.